2015 History of English

Instructor: Cheng Chuan Chieh

101501025 Arthur Fan 樊毓

Summary for Presentation

**“Holy Shit!”, A Brief History of Swearing**

Swearing or swearwords are different from other words since they are physiologically, linguistically, and historically different from other words. According to scientific evidence, swearwords are stored in the lower part of our brains where controls heartbeat and other physiological reactions, while other words are stored in the language area in the higher part of our brains. Linguistically, people focus on the connotations of swearwords rather than their denotations; however, they have so shocking, powerful denotations that it makes them swearwords as time passes.

Swearwords can be categorized into two main kinds: of religious oath and of obscenity. The idea of obscenity in ancient Roman period is quite similar to nowadays, and both words related to sexual or excremental behaviors can be used as swearing. However, when Christianity appears and takes over the whole Europe, religious oaths becomes to be deemed as more powerful than obscene words. Since God uses oaths to demolish his enemies and God can bear no lie, oaths are taken as powerful as if people really say them in the power of God. Or, when they mention parts of God, they are really tearing God into pieces and injuring him, which nothing can be more powerful than that. (So God is already into pieces?)

After the Renaissance, the idea of humanity and civility appear, and the words common people use jump up again to the stage. At the same time, obscene words seem to find a balance at this period to become more and more as effective as using religious oaths. But the idea of obscenity at this period is quite different from nowadays. In 18th and 19th century, obscene words seem far more powerful than religious oaths again. It is quite easy to imagine that how powerful obscene words are to conservative Victorians who cannot endure “trousers” or “legs” spoken in the public. Nowadays, we just use the two categories free and mix them together, just like Holy Shit!

**Reference**  
Mohr, M. (2013). Holy Sh\*t: A Brief History of Swearing: Oxford University Press, USA.